

## APPENDIX F

### MALTA FIELD OFFICE FIRE MANAGEMENT PLAN

**Background:** The Malta Field Office manages 2.1 million acres of public lands (surface acres) in Phillips and Valley counties excluding the Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Indian Reservations. This is about 36 percent of the land within the two counties. Most of the land is rolling prairie terrain except for the southern portion which is the Missouri Breaks terrain type consisting of ridges and coulees. The rolling prairie terrain is vegetated with grasses, sagebrush, willows, and cottonwoods along some of the drainages. The Missouri Breaks terrain is vegetated with grasses, sagebrush on the ridges, and ponderosa pine on the slopes. Some willow and cottonwoods are found along some of the drainages.

The Malta Field Office contains four ACECs (Cow Creek, Prairie Dog Towns, Big Bend of the Milk River, and Azure Cave) and three WSAs (Burnt Lodge, Bitter Creek, and Antelope Creek). (See Map 7.)

**Planning Guidance:** Current guidance is provided by the Valley Resource Area Resource Management Plan (August, 1994) and the Phillips Resource Area Resource Management Plan (August, 1994). The fire management direction in the Valley Resource Area Resource Management Plan (pages 29-30) and the Phillips Resource Area Resource Management Plan (pages 34-35) will be updated as necessary to include the fire management objectives and guidance for each fire management zone described below.

**Wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation guidance common to all areas within the Malta Field Office boundaries.** See the state guidelines found in Appendix A.

**Prescribed fire and other fuels management guidance common to all areas within the Malta Field Office boundaries** In addition to the state guidelines found in Appendix A, the following resources or values will be given further consideration as specified.

**Wildlife:** In those areas where sagebrush is treated, and the objectives are met, the treatment should be done no more frequently than once in 30 years. In sagebrush/grasslands outside of those identified to meet the mature/old growth strategy, prescribed burning may be used.

#### GRASS AND RANGE LANDS (B1)

**Area Description:** The Milk River corridor is a lowland corridor of the Milk River that begins in Hill and Blaine

counties and extends through Phillips and Valley Counties. Only small tracts of public land are in this area. The river bottom generally has good quality soils. Crop production in the area includes hay, small grains, potatoes, corn, and other dry land crops as well as irrigated crop production. Mature cottonwood forests are common along the river corridor. Wildlife species in the area includes whitetail deer, pheasants, waterfowl, raptors and songbirds. This area also has noxious weed infestations and is an origin dispersal source for many weed species. The area has a high density of urban interface.

The Phillips and Valley County upland plains are glaciated areas north and south of the Milk River corridor. A large amount of public land is scattered in small tracts or modest sized blocks. This area is commonly referred to as Prairie Potholes and is rolling uplands of silty soils. Numerous streams, pits, and reservoirs are in the area. Private land is farmed for irrigated hay, grain crops, and CRP. Numerous crested wheatgrass seedlings occur on both private and public land. Native vegetation is mid and short grass prairies on the uplands and woody draws and pseudo riparian communities in draws, lowlands and coulees.

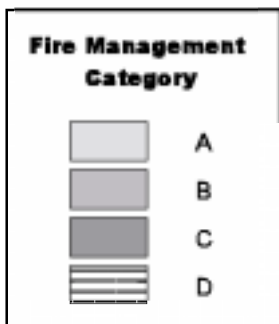
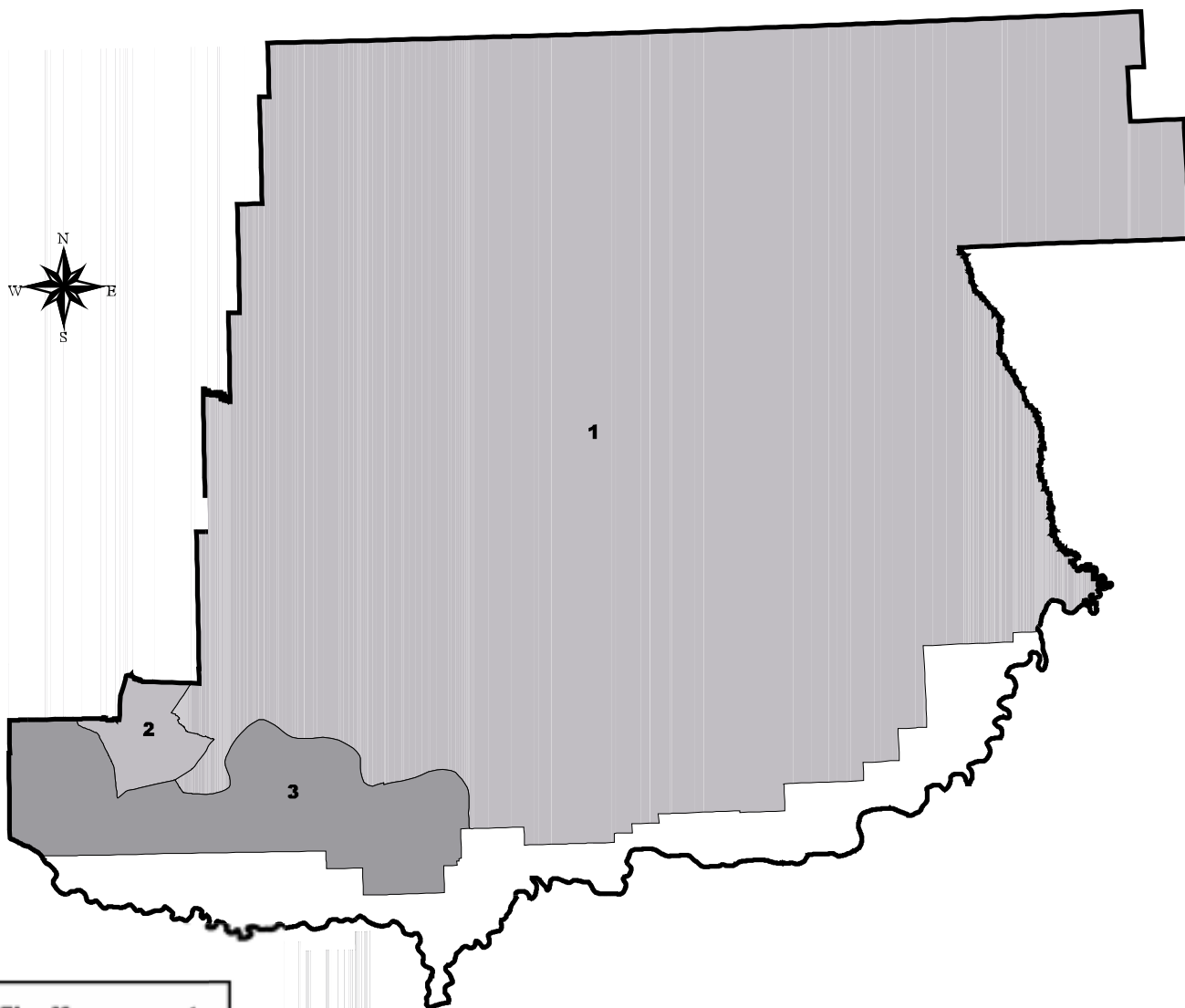
**Fire History:** From 1980 to 1999 Federal agencies have responded to 40 fires on BLM Grass and Range lands which burned an estimated 31038 acres. Average fire size was 776 acres.

**Interface/intermix:** Communities and isolated ranches are located throughout the Grass and Range lands adjacent to public lands. Typically these interface areas are surrounded by scattered grass and sage brush vegetation or crop lands. Communities within this polygon include the communities of Dodson, Loring, Whitewater, Saco, St. Maries, Hinsdale, Malta, and Glasgow. Nelson Reservoir, a popular recreation site, is another potential site.

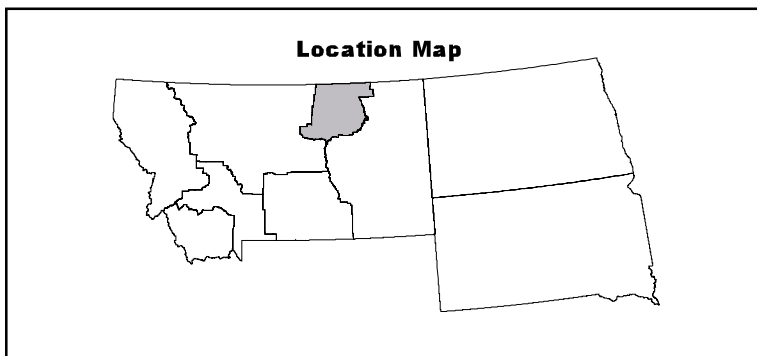
**Area Concerns and Constraints:** High value private and state land is adjacent to public lands. Forage production, weed control, riparian areas, wildlife habitat on public lands as well as crop and forage production on adjacent private lands will all require fire management consideration.

**Resource Objectives:** Public lands would be managed for high quality grasslands with nesting cover for waterfowl and upland birds, escape cover and space for other wildlife. Resource objectives include: 1. maintaining native species where they currently exist while managing non-native weeds, and 2. managing for diversified grasslands which

# MAP 7 MALTA FIELD OFFICE



- 1 Grass and Range Lands**
- 2 Little Rocky Mountains Timber**
- 3 Missouri Breaks**



provide livestock and wildlife forage, and nesting and rearing habitat. The uplands, riparian and wetlands areas should be managed for proper functioning condition. The area should be managed for diversified grasslands to provide livestock and antelope forage, nesting and rearing habitat for birds.

**Fire Management Objectives:** Wildland fire is not desired due to the large amount of private and state land and agricultural production throughout the area. The appropriate management response to wildland fire within the Milk River Corridor and the Phillips and Valley County Upland Plains would be aggressive fire suppression. Prescribed fire and other fuels management strategies may be used to reduce hazardous fuels and achieve other resource management objectives.

#### **Wildland Fire Suppression and Rehabilitation Guidance:**

**Cultural:** Appropriate management response to wildland fire in ACEC areas would include conditional fire line tactics (e.g., the use of natural barriers and hand constructed fire line). Use of earth moving/tillage equipment and the application of fire retardant would be restricted for wildland fire suppression in proposed ACEC areas unless waived by the Field Office Manager or an authorized officer.

**Prescribed Fire and Other Fuels Management Guidance:** Prescribed fire would generally not be used in the Milk River Corridor; however, BLM could use prescribed fires to reduce hazardous fuels, to manage undesirable plants (noxious weeds), to achieve grazing management objectives, or to achieve desired plant communities. The BLM could also be a cooperator on a prescribed fire project initiated by another party. All fuels management projects should be monitored (short and long term) to determine if project objectives have been met and for future reference. Land uses should be monitored and adjusted as necessary after fire to sustain stable soils and determine the extent objectives have been met. Prescribed fires may be used to rejuvenate meadows, wetlands, and grasslands to favor waterfowl, increase herbage production, manipulate vegetative community structure or to reduce hazardous fuels. All fuels management projects should be monitored (short and long term) to determine if project objectives have been met and for future reference.

**Vegetation:** Prescribed burning may be used to enhance the growth and vigor of certain species and to maintain specific vegetation communities. However, to maintain viable sagebrush communities for winter range of deer, antelope, and sage grouse, a mosaic of mature old growth sagebrush will be maintained.

## **MISSOURI BREAKS UPLANDS (C3)**

**Area Description:** The Malta Field Office portion of the Missouri River Breaks Uplands includes large amounts of public land in south Phillips and Valley counties. Within this area are portions of the Cow Creek Wilderness Study Area (WSA), the Burnt Lodge WSA, and the Antelope Creek WSA and the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument. Soils in this area are mostly heavy clays with some Bearpaw shales. Topography consists of rolling ridge tops with moderate to deeply incised canyons between. Native vegetation is a mosaic of sagebrush grasslands, juniper communities with conifers. Some draws have minor discontinuous riparian communities. Vegetation on private land in the area includes rangeland, annual small grains, hay, or CRP. Wildlife species in this area include mule deer, whitetail deer, antelope, bighorn sheep, mountain lion, elk, sage grouse, sharptail grouse, and waterfowl. Primary economic activity in the area is cattle production. There are few permanent residences or other developed habitations. Primary economic activity in the area is cattle production. There are some producing gas wells and a delivery pipeline system in the region.

**Wildland Fire History:** From 1980 to 1999 Federal agencies have responded to 131 fires on federal lands within the Breaks polygon which burned an estimated 11442 acres. Average fire size was 87 acres.

**Interface:** This area contains several communities and ranches which were built adjacent to public lands containing timber, grass, and steep slopes. The potential exists for urban interface fire related incidents. Interface areas adjacent to the Little Rocky Mountains include the communities of Zortman and Landusky. In the breaks are numerous ranches and the popular Pine Hills Recreation area which contains a cluster of homes surrounded by public lands.

**Area Concerns and Constraints:** Special concerns and constraints include historic cabins, wildlife species, soil erosion, an ACEC with cultural, paleontological, and vegetative values that might be effected by fire fighting equipment, and the use of earth moving/tillage equipment in the Burnt Lodge, Antelope Creek, and Cow Creek Wilderness Study Areas.

**Resource Objectives:** Public lands will be managed to provide a mosaic of forage and cover types to accommodate multiple use objectives. Management strategies should not aggravate the naturally high erosion rates. The natural vegetation and land form characteristics would be maintained to protect the WSA and ACEC characteristics. Resource objectives include: 1. maintaining native species where they currently exist while

managing non-native weeds; 2. managing for diversified grasslands which provide livestock and wildlife forage, and nesting and rearing habitat; 3. maintaining appropriate level of sagebrush cover, diversity, and dispersion in compliance with current guidance; 4. protecting, maintaining, and enhancing crucial wildlife habitats, wetland and riparian habitats; 5. maintaining an appropriate level of domestic livestock forage in any allotment to minimize disturbance to current grazing systems; and 6. maintaining an appropriate amount of thermal cover for critical wildlife.

**Fire Management Objective:** Fire could be a positive influence in much of this area and restoration of natural fire regimes will be encouraged where practical. However, each occurrence will have special consideration. Obvious concerns focus around structural developments, crop lands, livestock and livestock forage needs. Social and political considerations will dictate how each fire occurrence will be managed. Limited fire suppression based on current fire danger, resource availability and predicted weather may be used to ensure safety of fire suppression personnel, reduce cost of fire suppression, and provide an opportunity to return fire to its natural place in the ecology of the area. Only natural fire occurrences (lightning) will be used for limited suppression.

#### **Wildland Fire Suppression and Rehabilitation:**

**Cultural Resources:** Appropriate management response to wildland fire in the Cow Creek ACEC area would include conditional fire line tactics including the use of natural barriers and hand constructed fire line.

**Prescribed Fire and Other Fuels Management:** Prescription burns may be used to protect infrastructure or wildlife habitat that would be permanently lost in the event of a catastrophic wild fire. Use prescribed fire to achieve desired plant communities and to reduce hazardous fuel loads. Prescribed fires would generally not be used in areas of limited BLM ownership unless coordinated with adjacent landowners to achieve mutually beneficial objectives. Minimize impacts to sagebrush from prescribed fire wherever possible. Land uses will be monitored and adjusted as necessary after fire to sustain stable soils and vegetation. Some prescribed fire management objectives may be carried out by the limited fire suppression plan developed as part of the Upper Missouri watershed plan or National Monument Plan. When completing specific fire plans and designs in the Cow Creek ACEC, consult with appropriate Native American tribes on the potential to affect traditional cultural or religious concerns.

**Vegetation:** Prescribed burning may be used to enhance the growth and vigor of certain species and to maintain specific vegetation communities. To maintain viable sagebrush communities for winter range of elk, deer, antelope, and sage grouse, a mosaic of mature old growth sagebrush should be maintained.

## **LITTLE ROCKY MOUNTAINS, TIMBER (B2)**

**Area Description:** The Little Rocky Mountains consist of blocks of public land surrounded by private and/or Fort Belknap Reservation land. These areas are mountainous with steep slopes and heavy timber. Commercial timber is abundant with some Douglas fir on the north slopes, ponderosa pine and lodge pole on the south slopes, and lodgepole pine at the highest elevations. Riparian vegetation occurs along the numerous small streams and drainages. There are interspersed grassy meadows within the timber types. Secondary roads intersect the area. The area offers big game summer and winter ranges and habitat for upland game species. Recreational uses include hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and hiking. The area is also characterized by numerous roads from past mining activities.

**Wildland Fire History:** From 1980 to 1999 Federal agencies have responded to 108 fires on federal lands which burned an estimated 15200 acres. Average fire size was 141 acres.

**Interface:** Several ranches are built adjacent to public lands containing timber and steep slopes. Two small communities, Landusky and Zortman, have been identified as at risk because of proximity to heavy forest fuels and narrow one-way access.

**Area Concerns and Constraints:** Concerns and constraints include scattered land pattern, proximity of public and private lands, lands with cultural, paleontological, and vegetative values that might be damaged by high intensity wildland fire and fire suppression activities. Sensitive areas for cultural resources include the Dry Range west of the Smith River in Meagher County.

**Resource Objectives:** Manage native vegetation to meet standards for rangeland health. Maintain stable soils and sustain current land uses. Sagebrush habitats, especially those in identified sage grouse nesting and wintering areas and big game concentration areas should be maintained to the maximum extent possible. Scattered stands of Ponderosa Pine, especially those exhibiting old growth characteristics, shall be maintained where possible.

**Fire Management Objectives:** Fire, in most cases, can be desirable throughout this zone. However, each occurrence will have special consideration. Obvious concerns focus around structural developments, crop land, livestock and livestock forage needs. Social and political considerations will dictate how each fire occurrence will be managed.

**Wildland Fire Suppression and Rehabilitation:** Minimize the use of heavy equipment and avoid use of bulldozers in or near stream beds.

**Prescribed Fire and Other Fuels Management:** Prescribed fires would generally be used in this area to reduce the build up of natural and activity fuels, reduce the threat of stand replacement fire and reduce fire hazard in interface, rural inter-mix and residential areas. All prescribed fire activity would be coordinated with adjacent landowners to achieve mutually beneficial objectives. In some areas prescribed fire would be beneficial to achieve desired plant communities and to enhance wildlife use. Land uses will be monitored and adjusted as necessary after fire to sustain stable soils and vegetation. Mechanical treatment of hazardous and activity fuels would be used in some areas as a first entry. This would include use of wood products and hand piling and burning to reduce the threat of escaped prescribed fire. The second entry with prescribed fire would be broadcast/under burn. When completing specific fire plans and designs in specific areas sensitive for Native American traditional cultural and religious concerns, consult with appropriate Native American tribes on the potential to affect traditional cultural or religious concerns.

**Forestry:** The areas of primarily forested ground make up the vast majority of the Commercial Timber Base within the Malta Field Office. The majority of the timber is Ponderosa Pine, Douglas fir and Lodgepole pine as well as scattered pockets of hardwood species. Most areas show signs of decadence and mortality due to overstocking and the absence of fire and/or Forest Management, there is also wide spread insect damage in the mountain range. New stands of Ponderosa Pine and Douglas fir are encroaching into areas which historically were natural openings and meadows. Resulting fuel loads far exceed the normal range of variability. As forest management opportunities present themselves silvicultural practices may be applied which emphasize overall health of the forested stand and reducing fuel loadings in order to prevent loss due to fire, insects and disease.

**Vegetation:** Prescribed burning may be used to enhance the growth and vigor of certain species and to maintain specific vegetation communities. Maintain and promote stands of mature conifers with mixed grass and shrub under story vegetation. Protect riparian areas that exhibit an over story of deciduous trees from extreme fire events as conditions allow. To maintain viable sagebrush communities for winter range of deer, antelope, and sage grouse, a mosaic of mature old growth sagebrush will be maintained.

**Wildlife:** Inventory for bird nests and traditional mammal birthing areas will be conducted on each proposed prescribed burn areas in forested habitat one spring prior to the proposed project date. If permanent nest or birthing areas are located appropriate action including buffer areas will be identified in the burn plan to protect the site.